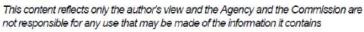European Education Area
Roadmap on creating a sustainable governance and
cooperation structure for a European University Alliance

EU CONEXUS
European University for Smart
Urban Coastal Sustainability

ROADMAP on creating a sustainable governance and cooperation structure for a European University Alliance

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Introduction

Responding to the call from the European Commission to form strategic and long-term oriented European University Alliances the European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability has been established in 2019 by six founding partners in six different countries. Only minor relationships were established beforehand, as there was a Joint Master course programme between UCV and LRUniv to which AUA has been associated, existing collaboration on a double degree programme between LRUniv and UTCB and loose contacts existed between UCV and KU and UCV and Zadar.

A thematically framed proposal for creating a European University Alliance has been developed by LRUniv who acted as coordinator of the proposal. LRUniv had only recently engaged in an institutional reform procedure which aimed at creating organizational structures that promote interdisciplinary education and research centred on the societal challenge of "Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability - "SmUCS". The European University proposal was set out to "europeanize" this institutional development strategy.

University partnerships were sought to correspond to and agree with this focus and general thematic framework. Governance and management structures were laid down in deliberation with the partners and each partner committed to lead one work package (WP) except for the coordinator who took the responsibility for the WP management and coordination and the WP concerned with IT.

The proposal was written under very tight time constraints and central coordination of the concept was concentrated on a few developers. But the institutional commitment at the highest political and strategic level was assured.

Higher Education and Research Policy Environment

Transnational cooperation in higher education is highly dependent on the willingness of national authorities to create the institutional framework for making it possible. The willingness might be there as the long-established Bologna process testifies. But the cultural environment for higher education institutions (HEI) in Europe has deep roots which are not easy to displace.

Autonomy

For the governance and the cooperation structure of a European University the basic condition for creating long-term sustainable links is the institutional autonomy of partner universities. Institutional autonomy is handled differently in the various countries and with regard to various levels. Some partner universities are directly dependent on the state: their staff contracts, their legal representation, their IT system is handled by the state. Others are autonomous with regard to functional services but depend on financial attributions that are defined according to a needs analysis, which has in turn an impact on the services configuration. Again, others are private universities and are completely independent in their functional activities as long as they conform to quality criteria set for the national higher education area.

These various degrees of dependency largely predetermine the degree of possible engagement of partner universities in the cooperation: creating an association is not possible for one, recruiting contractual staff has preceding negotiating cycles not adapted to short term needs for others, integration of IT systems might imply adaption of nationally provided information systems.

There is no single solution for overcoming all systemic barriers for collaboration but the political willingness to remove those should engage more ambitious adaption and harmonization efforts on a very practical level.
(See e.g. "Final Recommendations on a Smart Campus").

EU-CONEXUS has actively sought for close relationships with national authorities in HE and joined coordinated lobbying initiatives at European (FOREU) and national level (groupings of partner universities in European University Alliances) thereby creating a continuous dialogue on policy changes needed for more effective transnational cooperation.

Flexibility

Policy environments may find it easier to integrate flexibility with regard to certain legal preconditions.

One of the essential differences between national environments for funding of higher education institutions are regulations on tuition fees and the strictness of their limitation. As tuition fees and how to regulate or organise more or less open access to higher education is a highly political debate without consensus in sight.

Joint Educational Programmes have to find ways around and need essentially more flexibility within this regulatory environment. (See e.g. "Final Recommendations on Minor Programmes and Joint Master Programmes")

Legal framework

European Universities are transnational and do in general not fit into existing national basic HEI funding environments. For their sustainability there is, however, a need for the national level to engage in their long-term sustainability alongside other funding sources. Most of member states have provided co-funding for partner universities in European University Alliances. This is a first step in the right direction.

In the long term the national HEI policies would have to include the strategically interlinked universities as specific actors in a dynamic context for higher education at the national level. A specific legal framework for these transcendent objects at the crossing of the "National" and the "European" might help to progress on this vision.

This could mean to establish specific basic funding arrangements coupled with flexibility in institutional governance and educational programming.

Commitment

Involvement of highest political and strategic level

On technical grounds it proved useful to involve from the beginning of the design of the cooperation project the highest political level of each prospective partner institution. The design of the proposal was developed with the active participation of the rectors or their special delegates, who were introduced mainly because of language problems.

This generally shared strategic ambition represented the strongest basic building block for the Alliance. However, the vision and ambition need constant reconfirmation and reinterpretation during the evolvement of the collaboration.

The rather small group of six high-level representatives allowed a personal acquaintance and relationship building from the very early stages of the project. After the acceptance of the project proposal end of June 2019 all partners convened end of August 2019 in Paris even before the eligibility period of the funding agreement started. This already showed enthusiasm and commitment by everybody to start the collaboration.

Strong leadership – coherent partnership

The ambition of the partnership was heavily relying on the institutional and personal leadership of the coordinator, who brought in a coherent vision and a strong conviction of the strategic value of the project for the European Higher Education Area, but also for each partner university. Five out of the six middle-sized partner universities benefit from a comparable geographical location on an urbanized coastal area and all can contribute with complementary education and research strengths to the general thematic framework SmUCS. For each university the collaboration promised to be a boost for its internationalization strategy, but also for the valorisation of their specific education and research activities on a transregional European scale.

Without the strategic leadership of all partners consenting to the project, which is most important at the start but also in the course of development, the subsequent institutional uptake would be strongly hampered, if not made impossible.

Vision and mission clarity

Despite the clearly set thematic framework overarching the collaboration, it became evident from the beginning that the devil lies in the details. Questions about the disciplines/faculties that are concerned by this framework and students who are recognized as students of the Alliance are still not solved completely, not least in the minds of the partner university staff. The respectively diverging institutional culture and history with regard to interdisciplinarity, organizational structures and internal administrative and external partnership collaboration modes, as well as, most importantly, the interpretation of the longevity of the collaboration (time-limited project versus long-term strategic alliance) impacts on the uptake of the integrative framework European University.

The complexity and the all-inclusiveness of the initiative chosen to pursue by EU-CONEXUS needs the deployment of means and tools for intensive and continuous deliberation on its vision and mission on all levels. Additionally, and long-term resource stability is needed in order to win internal adherence as a precondition of sustainability of the institutional framework.

Formal institutionalization

On more formal grounds, partner universities can proceed in integrating the collaboration into their institutional administrative structures and procedures in order to increase adherence and commitment of staff up to the highest level.

The regular information of institutional governing bodies on activities of the Alliance creates knowledge and in the best case stronger engagement. A fixed agenda point on University Senate or Administrative Council meetings, research councils, academic councils, etc. has proved to be a good starting point for spreading

regularly the – for most administrations - new orientation of the institutional policy for strategic partnerships introduced by the European University.

One step further is the inclusion of this strategic orientation into the statutes or legal documents of a partner university. This is most efficient with a view on changes in the leadership of a university. The strategic ambition and vision of one rector, that might have introduced the alliance project to a partner university, is not always the same that is guiding the subsequent rector.

Formal "internalisation" of the European University activities in administrative structures and procedures reduces the "project" character of the Alliance and introduces institutional transformation in a continuous and fluid manner.

Long-term perspective and integrative funding

Another ingredient of institutional strategic commitment is a very practical cost-benefit calculation. As long as a partner university expects a positive return, it is incited to invest in the partnership. The stability and long-term perspective of resources dedicated by funding partners to the initiative is crucial for the initial phase of the partnership. In the long term, the growing number of joint activities and adjunct projects might be able to replace part of the basic funding that sustains the longevity of the collaboration. A major threat in the early development phase of European Universities is however the need to balance various funding instruments, timings, logics which overloads the coordination with administrative work. That means that resources needed for the construction of strategic jointness and sustainability have to be invested in technical project implementation.

Political support at the European and national level also expressed in basic funding attribution (combined European and national (regional) co-funding) will still be a major building block for institutional commitment in the long-term. Additionally, a long-term and integrative funding would enhance the effectiveness of strategic development of European Universities.

Governance and Management

Unanimous decision-making and equal representation

The EU-CONEXUS Governing Board is the highest decision-making body and composed by the rectors of the partner universities or their special delegates or exceptionally their vice-presidents. All partners are equally represented by one member and one vote. The decision-making is exclusively unanimous.

The unanimity requirement in the Governing Board does not only rely on votes of partner university representatives but includes also functional votes. The Student Board president, the Chairs of the Academic Council and the Research Council are members of the Governing Board. The equal representation of partner universities is formally disrupted if their membership is seen as institutional representation. But as their membership in the Governing Board depends on their functional role in other governing bodies, their votes should not be counted as institutional votes.

However, in practical terms, the decision-making "weight" of each partner is dependent on the combination of formal and functional participation in the Governing Board. The preparation of the agenda items is done by the Executive Director based on discussions with the Management Board. They are discussed in a tripartite governance meeting between the Council Chairs and the GB president. Despite the formal requirement of sending the Agenda points at least 14 calendar days before a meeting, this has not always been respected. Internal preparation of the discussion and position on the agenda items might be more intense when partners are better informed. This is the case for half of the members; those who are represented in the Councils and chairing the Governing Board.

Also, the general unanimity requirement can result in the situation that a unanimous decision of the rectors of partner universities can be rejected by one of the three functional members.

With joint activities growing and functional responsibilities getting more importance, it might be important to create stricter formal procedures that guarantee representativity and create and sustain trust. Restricting formal unanimity to representatives of partner universities and respecting formal requirements for sending out the agenda items are remedies for the problem of "weight" in decision-making.

For functional members a consultative voting right could be established and extended to a veto for eventually blocking a unanimous decision of the formal votes.

Institutional project coordination

The coordination of all activities relies on the involvement of dedicated staff at each institution. Some partners have chosen to recruit project managers, others have relied on dedicating existing staff with a part-time mission on the project. With the growing number of activities and adjunct projects to oversee a full-time staff for institutional coordination has been considered as necessary. The next project period foresees one fully dedicated person per partner to be responsible for not only managing the activities of one project but overseeing all activities of the Alliance at the level of a partner university.

Weekly meetings of the managing team (institutional coordinators and central coordinators) proved very useful for guaranteeing continuity of implementation actions, transversality of information, exchange of best practices, increased mutual understanding and team building.

A relatively stable and fully dedicated group of people responsible for the coordination of alliance activities at the institutional level enhances the efficiency of implementation and further development of the European University.

Distribution of tasks - involvement of staff

Equal representation is also important for the distribution of tasks and the involvement of staff at all levels. The organization of working groups foresaw the representation of each partner in each working group. Also, working groups that have more expert character and were initially planned to be conducted with a limited number of members selected according to their expertise have been reorganized and include representatives from each partner. The transversal character of all working groups proved beneficial in two aspects: First, more staff got into contact with the initiative's activities which helped its dissemination and visibility within the institutional environment. Second, although not all representatives were experts or professionals in certain subjects treated in working groups, the uptake of activities could be organized more smoothly.

Severe drawbacks of this method are the workload imposed upon the coordination staff and working group leaders who had to find meeting dates, organize discussions and follow-up on bigger groups, as well as the overdemand to the partner universities who had to motivate staff to engage into a large number of these groups. In particular, partner universities who had to invest into these representations without direct reimbursement quickly saw a limit to the possibilities of engagement of ever more staff in ever more working groups. In other partner universities, recruited project staff saw their task spectrum constantly growing without a corresponding compensation.

The motivation of the internal staff community can severely suffer out of these contradictory effects of "representation/dissemination versus workload/overload".

A clear analysis of how a certain subject or activity can be prepared for decision-making that includes all partners will be all the more important with an increase of the size of the Alliance. With the consecutive integration of academic associated partners who were associated to the activities with the perspective to become full partners in the follow-up funding period, the management of working groups became a central issue for reform of the collaborative mode.

In the new funding period, the preparation-validation cycle will be more formalized. In this way, preparation can be done by experts selected from a part for partner universities and validated by all.

Of course, one important ingredient of a more distributed working method is trust. Formal representation is in particular necessary where trust cannot replace equal participation in the collection and selection of information for analyses and the

preparation of proposals for decision-making. After three years of intensive collaboration at the level of the Governing Board, the Councils, the Management Board and all Working Groups, the level of trust ca be expected to have grown.

Also on the level of management, a less representative mode of collaboration bears the risk of less visibility and dissemination of the initiative within the internal staff community which is most important in the beginning of the collaboration. On a more mature level of collaborative its beneficial effects on workload and efficiency will outweigh its drawbacks. With a more trust based collaborative environment the distributed mode of collaboration is most efficient.

Technical coordination environment

IT safety and security regulations at the coordinator's university did not allow for the use of common project management tools provided by Microsoft or Google. The open source environment Nextcloud was chosen for storage of and collaboration on project documents and local licenses for Microsoft Teams or Zoom provided the videoconference needs. No proper project management tool has been used, but progress reports, workplans and Gantt charts were used in review cycles of project activities. Communication activities were planned on Trello.

For a coherent and complete follow-up of a growing number of activities a technical solution for the coordination of all Alliance activities – from information exchange, reporting, event organization, collaboration on documents to joint agenda planning, videoconferences and communication campaigns – is needed.

Administrative integration

Some management services have been centralized at an early stage of the collaboration. This is the case for communication and marketing services (Joint

Communication Unit), the IT services (Smart Campus Unit) and the management of a project development fund.

With the growth of joint activities centralization was considered more effective for the organization of the minor courses (Minor officers) and the Career Center.

Other activities needed better coordination (collective job shadowing, events).

With the growth of the number of joint activities centralized coordination needs to be intensified and central services for e.g. mobility, quality assurance, external partnerships, project and study programme development, student engagement and teachers training provide better integration and streamlining of the cooperation.